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If Only They Had Listened

During the late 1960s, an investigator of the United States' foreign aid program discovered that great amounts of American money and equipment being sent to Cambodia were being diverted to pay for Communist programs.

At the same time, the investigator learned, armed Communists were harassing American citizens throughout Southeast Asia in ever-increasing numbers.

So the investigator, Jerry M. Jackis of Charleston, informed the CIA station chief in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) that the developments could mean only one thing: The Communists were laying plans to dominate all of South Vietnam.

At first, however, no one would listen.

"I was duly shunted aside, ignored and even ridiculed for my anxieties," he says.

But Jackis persisted and eventually his information was cabled to Washington — presumably, he says, to CIA headquarters.

And one week later, the reply came.

"I was told, in so many words, by the CIA, to sit down, shut up and stop rocking the boat. To my complete surprise and chagrin, Washington further said that these armed forces were not Communist agents at all, but just local bandits on a rampage."

Besides, the reply said, even if the aid were being diverted, it nevertheless was being used to build the local economy and that was good.

Jackis could do nothing more. But history proved him right just a few years later.

"As it turned out, these very same 'local bandits,' as the CIA called them, emerged as full-fledged soldiers of the Communist government of North Vietnam. These 'local bandits' later inflicted death upon 50,000 brave American soldiers.

"If the CIA in Saigon and Washington had been sympathetic to my observations and taken my concerns seriously, the U.S. government could have very easily adopted swift and forceful measures to nip the small and initial Communist activity in the bud and very possibly averted the disastrous Vietnam war that ensued. Sad to relate, nothing of the sort was done."

Instead Jackis was returned to Washington, "and by then Congress had passed a law to get rid of deadwood in the Agency for International Development. The law was intended to get rid of higher-ups, but the Kennedy administration handled it by firing 335 people on the lower echelons — including me because I got an unsatisfactory rating, the first one in my life."

Of those 335, Jackis was one of few who pressed his case hard enough to get a hearing, which ended with an order reinstating him in his job. He also was told he would be sent overseas as soon as there was an opening. "So I did piddling work around in Washington for a year while I waited."

At the end of a year, however, Jackis was told there still were no available jobs overseas. The inference Jackis drew was that he was going nowhere, so he quit.

He was supposed to have had a second hearing after that, but it was canceled one day before it was to have been held.

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"Because after my resignation the CIA put out all kinds of rumors that I drank too much, chased women too much, was no good; et cetera."

Today, Jackis, retired and living in Charleston with his Korean-born wife Sungsook, still feels bitter that his government first rejected him and then refused to allow him a platform (the second hearing) from which to speak.

"That was deplorable. If I had had the second hearing I could have come out and said, 'Listen, the Communists are coming in Vietnam and we've got to do something.' If I could have just done that, something could have gotten rolling and we could have countermanded the Communists instead of the thing going to hell as it did."

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The experience left Jackis feeling discredited, disappointed and bitter. For awhile he couldn't even get a job, but finally he came back to Charleston where he taught school. Then he went back to Korea, where he had served once and got jobs teaching school, editing copy for a Korean newspaper and finally teaching in a university where he met Sungsook, who was a student. They were married in 1984 and returned to Charleston that year.

But though Jackis is retired, he still is not keeping quiet. Rather he wants to convince his fellow Americans that the same problems still exist unchecked in many other parts of the world.

"Practically all over the world," he says. "Most of the people in foreign service, the State Department, the CIA, even the Army, do not get out to see how the people live and what they are doing. They live in enclosed compounds. They have little Americas with the whole bit — the basketball courts, tennis, bowling, commissaries, movies. So they don't get out of these compounds and as a result they don't know what's going on in the countries they're supposed to be reporting on."

As an example of how deep the problem runs, Jackis tells of the time he invited a foreign service officer in Korea out for a *soju*, which in effect is Korea's national drink. But although the officer had been in Korea four years he did not know what a *soju* was.

Jackis says such ignorance allows problems to grow unchecked right outside U.S. embassy windows and by the time Americans learn the truth of what's going on in these countries it's too late.

Southeast Asia is just one example, Jackis says. Iran and Cuba are other examples and there are more.

"They (foreign service officers) are supposed to get out to see what's going on, but they don't. All over the world, they don't."

Jackis says his experiences have left him with a feeling of deep mistrust of his government.

"I don't trust my government at all any more. I have no qualms about my country. I love my country. I am a patriot. It's just these stupid knuckleheads in the government who are fouling up."

Jackis says a glaring weakness of the foreign service agencies is that they concentrate on a nation's leaders while the Communists concentrate on the grassroots levels.

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"This is the one thing the Communists do so well. They get on the grassroots level to influence the peasants. This is what they're doing in El Salvador today. They don't fool around with the big shots. They don't want the big shots. They want the Castro in the hills. They support him and he takes over. The same thing is happening right now in Central and South America. But the point is, you can't find out what's going on if you sit in an office behind a desk. You've got to get out."

In his retirement, Jackis has written a book on his experiences in Cambodia and is trying to find a publisher. He also does some free-lance writing and part-time teaching, but derives most of the rest of his income from a downtown building he bought 30 years ago. Mrs. Jackis is a straight-A student at Trident Technical College where she is studying computer science.

Jackis was born in Savannah, but was reared in Charleston. After two years at The Citadel he joined the Army and became a scout under Gen. George Patton in World War II, during which he received the Bronze Star.

Jackis left the Army in 1946, returned to The Citadel to earn his bachelor's degree and then went to work for the federal government.

He eventually became an end-use investigator in Cambodia. It was his job to make sure products sent to Southeast Asia for a particular purpose were being used for that purpose. And it was because he did that job so well that his troubles began.

But despite it all, if he had it to do all over again, he would.

"My conscience is clear," he says. "I tried."